Reflections

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL

FAITH AND CITIZENSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES

Faith Engaging Politics: Passion and Constraint

By David E. Price

Students of my generation at Yale Divinity School, who received ethics instruction from H. Richard Niebuhr, James Gustafson, and William Lee Miller, are likely to find the current renewal of interest in religion and politics both familiar and ironic. Familiar, because it highlights the relation of faith and civilization that Niebuhr explored as a "perennial" area of "Christian perplexity." Ironic, because it sometimes places us in the surreal position of denying that we are aggressive secularists.

Speaking personally, I regard my undergraduate and YDS years, which coincided with the early civil rights movement and culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as the time when my political and religious identities were decisively shaped. Nowadays, religious conservatives claim the banner of faith-based politics for themselves, and their political leaders not only ignore the religious and moral roots of progressive politics but often portray the entire Democratic Party as hostile to the faith connection.

How has it come to this? Some of the religious groups that we criticized in the 1960s for their individualistic and otherworldly approach to faith have become politically mobilized, and their cultural conservatism has become a key component of Republican politics. "Mainstream" religious communities have often seemed confused or complacent. Some have mistakenly assumed, reacting to the excesses of the Religious Right, that the separation of church and state requires a separation of faith and politics. Some progressive politicians have even become reluctant to tell their own personal stories or to advocate their positions in moral terms. Among many mainstream congregants, nothing has ever quite matched the clarity and conviction of civil rights, and there has been a reluctance to take on religious conservatives in either religious or political forums.

Some of this confusion and complacency has begun to lift, thanks in part to the wake-up call furnished by the 2004 election. But it is not just on the religious and political "left" that such discussions have intensified. There seems to be a renewed awareness across the spectrum that the faith-politics nexus requires searching examination, and that this cannot and should not be mainly a matter of seeking political advantage.

Both our faith and our politics require the exploration of the wellsprings of our own vision for society and of the way our deepest values should shape public policy. It is in this spirit that Yale Divinity School has hosted various faith and politics discussions over the past year and that I have been asked to contribute to the current issue of *Reflections*. I will focus on the passion and conviction that faith brings to politics, the constraints on political power it inspires, and the theologically based humility that tempers our engagement.

Passionate Engagement

The rediscovery by many Americans of the Hebrew prophets and their call for justice that "rolls down like waters" (Amos 5:24) had far-reaching political and religious significance in the 1960s. Many of us came to understand that the familiar compartmentalization of life—whereby people who were loving and generous in their personal relationships

saw no contradiction in supporting laws and social practices that denied others their humanity—was ultimately untenable. The result was a new direction in public policy, charted by landmark civil rights statutes in 1964 and 1965.

Although civil rights remains a paradigmatic case, the prophetic imperative to "do justice and love kindness" (Micah 6:8) speaks to much of our political life. It requires us to cut through the welter of policy detail and ask what government is doing in our name—to subject military interventions to "just war" criteria, for example, or evaluate governmental budgets as statements of moral priorities.

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Faith inspires passionate engagement in the political arena, but that does not mean that it is always simple or straightforward to translate religious and moral convictions into social action. Our faith traditions themselves reveal various modes of engagement —for example, the biblical roles of prophet and peacemaker. While the psalmist extols the blessings of "kindred living together in unity" (133:1), Jeremiah rebukes those whose desire for peace leads to passivity in the face of evil. "From prophet to priest . . . they have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (6:13–14). The life of Jesus displays a similar tension. Some, like Martin Luther King, Jr., may find creative ways of reconciling the roles, but often people of faith will be called to differing, even contrasting, modes of engagement.

Passion must also employ reason. In the legislative arena the calculation of consequences is essential. One of the few times during my service in Congress that I have referred explicitly to my seminary background came in early 2007 during a caucus discussion of a Democratic proposal to put conditions and withdrawal deadlines on a supplemental appropriations bill on Iraq. One colleague stated that because the bill did not immediately defund the war he was not certain that he, as a former seminarian, could vote for it "in good conscience."

This prompted me to counter with the distinction, familiar from the first day of Ethics 101, between deontological and teleological theories of ethics, although of course I did not lay those exact terms on my colleagues. What if the result of joining Republicans in a "no" vote, because our proposal fell short of liberal members' notion of perfection, was to bring it down? What if the consequence was to forfeit the best chance we might have for some time to compel a change in war policy? What if the result was to show fatal weakness and division and thus to compromise our longer-term prospects for taking foreign policy in a new direction? It was *precisely* "conscience," I said, that required us not merely to measure our bill against an ideal standard but to count the costs and calculate the consequences of defeat.

The Search for Common Ground

Passion and conviction are compatible with seeking common ground with those who come to politics from other backgrounds or perspectives—indeed, they often require it. The happy experience of the civil rights movement and of many movements since is that one can bring one's deepest convictions to political advocacy and at the same time ally with people whose theological and philosophical perspectives differ greatly and sometimes do not have conventional religious roots at all. This will often involve going beyond a specifically religious frame of reference, invoking the commonly held values and shared aspirations of the wider community. It also requires a willingness to "reason together," as opposed to viewing our religious convictions as debate-stoppers.

Religious conservatives sometimes portray the search for common ground as requiring them, as one of my colleagues put it, "to check my Christian beliefs at the public door." There is also a tendency to see the invoking of universal values as producing a mere "common denominator" that lacks specificity or force. That, I believe, greatly underestimates the power of the fundamental principles of our constitutional democracy, which have deep religious roots but also find broader resonance. Certainly it would have come as news to Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, as they invoked the Declaration of Independence to combat slavery and segregation, that making a universalistic appeal diluted their passion or the force of their argument.

What if such common ground is not to be found? Obviously, there are sectarian rules and observances that individuals and communities regard as binding, with no thought of extending them to the broader

community. But the boundaries delineating what may legitimately be taken into the public arena are neither clear nor uncontroversial. Some politicians, for example, including many who are personally opposed to abortion on religious or moral grounds, argue against "imposing" such beliefs on society. Others regard that position as unjustifiably preempting legitimate political debate.

The issue of gay rights, like that of abortion, evokes contrasting responses *among* religious communities; many people of faith, for good reason, believe that the same moral standards of fidelity and mutual commitment should apply to both gay and heterosexual relationships. Moreover, any attempt to translate religiously based disapproval of a particular sexual orientation into civil law is likely to conflict with broadly shared principles such as civil liberty, nondiscrimination, and equal opportunity, which themselves have strong religious pedigrees.

In such instances, the best course is often to stop short of codifying specific religious and moral precepts, leaving the individual and communal expression of conscience free. But we cannot always resolve such matters simply by declaring them "off limits" for political debate. Those who oppose efforts to codify or sanction various aspects of personal morality will often need to challenge the proponents directly, within religious and other institutions of civil society as well as in the political arena.

Claiming divine sanction for our own power or program does not merely undermine American pluralism; it also flies in the face of our religious understanding of human sinfulness and divine transcendence.

Many questions surround the agenda for engagement—not only what issues are best left free of governmental prescription but also how to prioritize the wide range of issues with implications for faith and morality. Religious communities often seem to talk past one another. Conservative groups focus on matters such as abortion and gay marriage, while liberals stress questions of economic justice and war and peace. There is some convergence on pornography and gambling and, increasingly, environmental stewardship. All would do well to guard against the human tendency to address only those questions and heed only those teachings that we find convenient or comfortable.

Some selective judgment is inevitable, however, whether we are dealing with the codes of Leviticus or the admonitions of the Sermon on the Mount. Much depends on how we read and understand the Bible—referencing scriptural commands, for example, as opposed to heeding the admonitions throughout the prophets and the New Testament to attend less to the minutiae of the law and more to its "weightier matters . . . justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). Relating faith and politics is not merely a matter of obeying commands; it requires ongoing efforts to mine the riches of our religious traditions and to apply them to new and challenging circumstances.

Faith-based Constraints

Even as our faith prompts passionate engagement in the political arena, it also raises warnings and suggests constraints on the form and content of our advocacy. Two constraints written into the U.S. Constitution—checks and balances among the major organs of government, and the First Amendment's twin prohibitions of the "establishment" of religion or the prevention of its "free exercise"—have deep religious roots and continuing significance in terms of our understanding of human nature and religious liberty.

James Madison's reflections on the "interior structures of the government" reveal a persistent streak of Calvinism in this son of the Enlightenment:

> What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men . . . you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. (*Federalist*, no. 51)

This view, interpreted by Reinhold Niebuhr as a landmark expression of "Christian realism," must be distinguished from the more simplistic anti-power ideology that persistently rears its head in American politics. Government is hardly the only realm where power exists or can be abused; in fact, political power can be used to counter or control economic, military, or other kinds of power. We must attend not only to the dangers of strengthening a given organ of government but also to the powers and interests that might fill the vacuum if it is weakened. The

realism rooted in our religious traditions provides an awareness of the presence of self-interest and self-seeking in all human endeavors, the necessity to use power judiciously as we pursue the common good, and the need for checks and safeguards as we recognize the vulnerability of power in all realms to distortion and abuse.

The First Amendment also embodies religiously inspired constraints on engagement. By no means does it require a strict "privatization" of faith. But it does provide certain ground rules for relating religion to government. Religious conservatives often chafe at these ground rules and treat them as a secular imposition. People of faith need to understand and insist that, on the contrary, the First Amendment has deep and firm religious roots. A brief look at the lineage of the establishment clause will reveal that Roger Williams and other proponents of church-state separation were far more focused on the church's integrity than on the state's prerogatives. What was and still is at stake is not only civil liberty but also religious faithfulness.

The First Amendment and the tension between the establishment and free exercise clauses have been at issue in debates over President Bush's "faith-based initiative." Such initiatives—congregationally sponsored HUD housing for the elderly, for example, and Meals on Wheels—flourished in my district for many years before the Bush administration. I thought Democrats should have been more vocal in welcoming the President to the cause. But there was also good reason to voice concern about the ground rules. Religious organizations have historically taken pains—often by administering their social services through a legally distinct entity—to avoid using federal funds for sectarian purposes and to ensure against discrimination in hiring and the choice of beneficiaries. This is what Bush sought to alter, and it helps explain the difficulties the initiative encountered in the Senate and the courts.

Finally, our religious traditions teach us humility, and that too should shape and constrain our politics. This is the point of the familiar story of Abraham Lincoln's response during the Civil War to a clergyman who expressed the hope that the Lord was on the side of the Union (in other words, "God Bless America"). "I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right," Lincoln said. "But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

This anecdote, like Lincoln's masterful Second Inaugural address, draws on a religious understanding central to the Jewish and Christian faiths: our own will and striving are always subject to God's judgment, even—perhaps especially—when we are most confident we are doing God's will. This does not mean that we engage less vigorously; after all, Lincoln was relentlessly pursuing a military victory. But he did voice what Reinhold Niebuhr termed a "religious reservation": a recognition that ultimate judgment belongs to God alone and a refusal to presume an absolute identification between his own cause and God's will.

"Like 'God-fearing' people of all ages," Niebuhr wrote, "[we] are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire." Note that, once again, the most powerful argument against religious and political pretension is not secular but theological. Claiming divine sanction for our own power or program does not merely undermine American pluralism; it also flies in the face of our religious understanding of human sinfulness and divine transcendence.

So let us engage: our country needs and our faith requires our full-throated advocacy. We can engage far more effectively by taking explicit account of the faith traditions that provide most Americans with their moral frames of reference. This is partly a matter of communicating effectively, but even more of understanding what is required of us as heirs to these riches. A more deeply rooted politics will enable us to make a more authentic and persuasive case for a just society, even as it equips us to resist political arrogance and pretension and to defend the American constitutional order.

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